

mike wheeler beats the devil by heartofwinterfell

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Alternate Universe, Gen, Minor Character Death, Minor Violence, it loosely follows the plot of IT so let that act as a warning

Language: English

Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jonathan Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Will Byers

Relationships: Eleven/Mike Wheeler, Jonathan Byers/Nancy Wheeler, Minor or Background Relationship(s)

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Summary:

“i never had any friends later on like the ones i had when i was twelve. jesus does anyone?”

the darkest places need the brightest light and god damn if mike wheeler didn't have friends that outshined the sun. {an it au}

mike wheeler beats the devil

Author's Note:

Welcome to the IT AU only I asked for! This fic has been in my head since last summer, but I never got around to it and now it feels especially timely! Two things first:

1. I'd need about 100k more words to even begin telling the full story of IT (just the children's section) so consider this fic snapshots of the plot featuring the Stranger Things characters. It's very episodic in nature, with the battles being especially "condensed" but one of the beauties of fanfiction is most readers will come in with working knowledge of the IT and ST canon, ready to fill in the blanks.

2. That being said, my working knowledge of the IT novel is rusty at best; I last read the book in full when I was 13. So while I use the basic plot of the book, I've borrowed from both the 90s and 2017 adaptations and also just made a few things up as I went along.

I hope you guys enjoy and thank you to all those who helped and encouraged me while writing it!

may 31st 1983

It was raining that day. Everyone remembers that it was raining. They can't remember what song was playing on the stereo or what color Nancy was painting her nails or what it smelled like in the kitchen, but everyone knows it was raining.

Holly wouldn't have grabbed the paper boat if it hadn't been.

Mike hadn't made it; Will had. They had been playing Dungeons and Dragons the night before and Mike sent them on a quest that required a journey down a long and winding river. In between listening to

fight about what equipment to take, Will had found a few sheets of old newspaper and folded them so neatly and precisely into that little boat. He even wrote *SS Wheeler* on the side. Mike liked it so much he had brought it upstairs to put in his bedroom. It never made it there.

What did happen to that little boat? Where did it float to?

At first, it floated down the side of Maple Street, making a fast course to the storm drain Holly didn't know to look out for.

It slipped so easily through the cracks and Holly raced after it, dropping to her knees and ducking her head to peer into the dark in hopes of seeing a flash of white paper, the *SS Wheeler* close enough for her short arm to reach.

Instead she saw a red balloon. And a red painted smile. And big bright red eyes.

"Looking for this?"

...

june

The thing about living in a small town like Hawkins, Indiana is everyone owns a piece of your tragedy.

The Wheeler fridge overflows with pot roasts and casseroles and frozen chicken bakes that only Ted Wheeler has the stomach to eat. The phone never stops ringing, but Karen Wheeler answers every call, in case it's the police, in case it's the FBI, in case it's anyone who knows anything. It's never more than a neighbor wanting to help and always falling frustratingly short.

The Byers never quite leave the house, but never actually stay either. Joyce inhabits the first floor, trying to make Karen eat, fielding phone calls, making sure only the Chief is allowed through the front door. Jonathan takes the second floor, often just sitting with Nancy

and holding her hand, never pushing for more than a few words in the span of hours. Will keeps to the basement. Like his mother, he tries his hardest to make Mike eat and like his brother, the best he can offer is his hand and quiet presence, reassurance where there can't be any. But they all try anyway.

Dustin and Lucas know how to duck into the backyard and through the back door without being noticed. It's Lucas who smuggles in his dad's state of the art VHS player and tapes of old MASH episodes. And it's Dustin who stays the night when the Byers and Lucas have to go home; his parents aren't really ones to ask how he chooses to spend his summers.

He's the one who most often sees Mike cry. It happens long after midnight, times when Mike must be sure Dustin is asleep. Some nights, Dustin pretends he is. Other nights, he slides next to Mike, shoulder to shoulder, and says nothing. No jokes, no promises. No "It will get better."

Friends don't lie. And even if that's not lie, it's not quite the truth either.

...

june 17th

Jennifer Hayes's missing poster has only been up for a few days, but it seems clear the Hawkins Police Department has partially given up the search. The few times any of them ever brought *that subject* up, Will quietly alludes to how tired Chief Hopper looks. How he refuses to bring *that subject* up when he or Jonathan are in the room. His mom knows things though. And those things only make her eyes red.

Jennifer looks the same in her poster as she did the last time they saw her in school. Will had pointed out she was even wearing the same floral dress.

Mike keeps getting caught staring at the posters. Each time Dustin and Lucas and Will don't know what to say. What can you say,

knowing the posters cover up the posters of a much younger girl missing for more than two weeks longer and still unfound?

She had been sitting behind him in science class and then she never came back. She had been outside when she wasn't supposed to be, when someone was supposed to be watching her, looking out for her...

"Mike!"

He jumps and turns to see his three friends, his only friends, staring at him again. Like they always do now.

"We were, uh...we were thinking of going to The Palace. Wanna join?" Dustin, trying to smile.

"Yeah, you can watch Dustin go broke trying to beat Max's score." Lucas, doing his best to make Mike laugh.

He succeeds in making Dustin scoff. "These things don't happen overnight."

"Or in three weeks..."

Dustin tries to box Lucas on the shoulder but only manages to knock over his bike. At this, Mike cracks a smile and he sees how Will perks up. It only heightens Mike's guilt for what he's about to say next. Mike hates how he's always disappointing them.

"My mom wants me home. I know town curfew's seven, but hers is like four..." Mike doesn't know if he means that as a joke. It only makes all their trying smiles falter.

"But we'll see you tomorrow, right? Quarry?"

"Yeah, of course."

They all wave their goodbyes and Mike watches as they all hop on their bikes and stays watching until they're only small dots in the distant. He wants to go. He wants to try. He just doesn't know when it stops being so damn hard.

...

june 20th

Mike can't sleep.

He thinks, just for a moment, about slipping into Nancy's room and curling up in her bed, like they did those first few nights. He even reaches her door, raises his hand up to knock, before thinking better of it. The counselor at his mom forces him to see keeps telling him that grief is something that needs to be shared. Mike just doesn't want anyone to have to feel half of what he's feeling.

The kinds of feelings that send him out half sleep walking in the middle of the night, constantly going back to *her* door.

How he always comes to stand outside of Holly's room, he doesn't know. It's like a voice in the back of his head, low and insistent, propels him there. Tonight, it's strong enough that he places his hand on the doorknob.

He walks into her room for the first time since that day. He isn't sure why he expected it to look monumentally different. It looks exactly the same with the baby pink walls he and Nancy helped paint when he was Holly's age. The only thing missing is a three-foot lump in the bed.

So it is monumentally different in the only way that matters.

Something drops to the floor, causing Mike to jump and slam the door closed behind him. He freezes, fearing the footsteps of his mom – or worse, his father – who had silently forbidden them from entering this room. But no one comes.

Mike takes a hesitant step further into the room and sees a photo fell from off the nightstand. He knows what picture is in the frame before he picks it up. It's from last September, the first day of school. Nancy on the left, Mike on the right, Holly in between with her purple

backpack and pigtails and smiling so brightly because it's her first day at big kid's school.

He runs a fingertip along the glass and it shatters.

"Mike."

Holly's closet is opened just a crack. Until it creaks and moves an inch. And then another. And then another.

There's only enough room for a red balloon to float out of the darkness.

"Take it, Mike."

The photo drops from his hands, the picture smeared with drops of blood where her smiling face had been. He takes a few shaky steps back toward the door, his hand grappling for the handle. The balloon follows his path.

"Holly wanted it." Mike stops. *"Guess no one ever taught her not to take things from strangers."*

The balloon explodes in his face. And Mike sees It. The orange hair, the red nose and red smile, the teeth.

"Don't you want to see her again?"

Mike doesn't remember opening the door because he isn't the one who wrenches it open. He sees the teeth and then suddenly he's falling backwards against someone.

"Fuck Mike, are you okay? We...I heard screaming." Nancy, kneeling beside him. And Jonathan standing behind her, keeping one eye on the parents' door at the end of the hall. Nancy is looking only at him, not into Holly's room, which tells Mike all he needs to know. All that will be left of tonight is a shattered picture frame.

So he says nothing. Instead, he let's Nancy hold him and he cries. Because in the morning, something has to happen. He has to make something happen. He's just not sure what yet.

...

june 24th

Will Byers has always played lawful good characters, so when Mike asks him to steal classified police case files from his almost step-father, he can feel something in his brain short circuiting.

Will says he'll do it though.

The offices are more somber than Will ever remembers them being. Officers Powell and Callahan have never been chipper or eager to see him hanging around, but they never looked so morose, hunched over their desks with missing posters looming large over them. Will tries not to look into Jennifer's eyes as he walks towards Hopper's office.

His head snaps up when Will slips into the room. "Hey kid, what are you doing here?"

Will already feels himself folding when he sees the dark circles under his eyes. "Uhm-..."

"Did I forget I was driving you home? And look, I know you're used to just riding your bike back, but your mom and I...with all that's been going on..."

"No!" Will swallows, thinks about what Mike or Lucas would say. "I get it. Yeah, we left The Palace early so I'm just...here for a ride."

Hopper nods, but Will can see his thoughts have drifted elsewhere, his eyes fixed somewhere above Will's head. Will thinks if he turns around now, he'll see Holly and Jennifer again.

"So should I...?" Will motions to the chair he now so often inhabits when he's waiting for Hopper to finish work.

But Hopper shakes his head. "No. I'll just tell Callahan and Powell we're done for the day." He looks as if he's about to say something

else, but he only gets up and walks out, closing the door behind him. Perhaps the universe really does want Will to steal these files.

Getting up slowly, Will inches behind the desk, his open backpack clutched in his shaking hands. When Will sees all the papers and photos scattered across the desk, he realizes he can't possibly take it all without Hopper noticing the theft. What could Mike be looking for? These photos, ones with puddles of blood peeking out in the corners?

Suddenly Will's gagging and he starts blindly grabbing papers, ones with the names Hayes and Wheeler scrawled on the top, and a photo or two with those terrible red spots. Not enough for anyone to notice a thing missing.

"Sure about that?"

Will's backpack lands on the floor with a dull thud. The lights flicker above him. Will can feel the sharp edge of the wooden desk digging into his palm where his hand is attached to it with a death grip.

"Little Will Byers, what would mommy say if she saw you stealing? Is Mike Wheeler really worth all this?"

Will can't breath. But when he looks up, there's nobody there. Except the lights still flicker above him and the room feels five degrees colder than when he entered. Will leans down slowly to grab the backpack.

It's then that something sticky encircles his wrist.

He doesn't want to look. He can't look. He can barely move. But somehow his eyes glance upwards and he sees a dark void surrounded by rows of sharp teeth, ready to swallow him whole. He screams at the same time it does.

Will wrenches his body backwards, desperately clawing at the tentacle fingers that ensnare his wrist. He crashes to the floor at the same time he hears the office door colliding against the wall.

"Will!" Hopper is by his side instantly. "What happened?" Powell, Callahan, and Flo are all in the doorway, only one looking genuinely

concerned.

Will wants to scream again. He wants them to look, to see what he saw, to tell him he's not crazy, or maybe tell him that he is and it all had been a walking nightmare. But he doesn't say a single word to any of them.

Only when Hopper is driving him home, stealing too many concerned looks in his direction that tell Will he'll be having a long talk with his mom later, does Will remember his backpack on the seat in the back, with all the information he had taken safely inside.

...

july

"Hey Mike?"

"Yeah?"

Mike is pouring over one of the photos, the one from Jennifer's crime scene, near a diner where she used to get strawberry milkshakes with her friends. That day, all the friends saw and heard different things that amounted to nothing at all. But they all mentioned how much Jennifer loved strawberry milkshakes.

Will sometimes ordered the same flavor at that diner, too.

"Nothing."

...

july 3rd

"Damnit!"

The Dig Dug machine goes black before flashing Dustin's two least

favorite words: game over. Lucas starts snickering behind him.

“You weren’t even close that time.”

Dustin swears he catches a glimpse of red hair, Max watching him try and fail and try again and fail again. His hand immediately goes to his pocket, digging for his last few quarters. “Today is the day.”

“Give it up, dude. Just admit she’s better than you. Right, guys?” Lucas turns to Mike and Will, but both are transfixed by Keith, standing by the door with Officer Powell. All four boys watch as Keith points Powell towards the bulletin board. The whole arcade seems to go quiet as the officer hangs up a new poster beside the previous two.

Dustin doesn’t want to move or go look, but Mike is there before Powell has exited the building.

“Tommy Harris,” Lucas reads. Dustin notices right away that he’s older, much older than Holly Wheeler.

“My sister knows him,” Mike says, staring at teenaged face like he’s willing it say something. “This doesn’t make any sense.”

No one has to tell Mike he’s right.

...

july 6th

He’s so close he can taste it. His thumbs have long gone numb from pushing at the plastic buttons and if he looks too quickly to one side of the screen, he starts seeing double. But seven hundred and twenty-five thousand points. Dustin the Destroyer would come to reign again.

“Come on, wastoid, time to go. Curfew.” Keith looms over him, greasy black hair almost skimming the top of his head. Dustin squirms away, but refuses to take his fingers off the controllers.

“Do you see my score? I’ve almost-...”

Keith wastes no time body checking him away from machine. Dustin regains his footing in time to see those familiar neon red words flash across the screen. “Seriously?”

“Seriously?” Keith mocks in a nasally voice with that exaggerated lisp that always earns him a scathing glare from Lucas. But Lucas isn’t here to defend his honor, as Keith always so kindly put it. After Tommy H, most moms cracked the curfew down to six-thirty or earlier.

And the empty Palace feels that rule every summer night now. No one over the age of sixteen is hogging a machine. Even those few remaining brave souls seem less absorbed in their games and more absorbed in forgetting someone their age, probably older, went missing two days ago.

“Look I don’t want the Chief in here tomorrow with your fucking missing poster, asking me why I didn’t make you leave at curfew. So beat it.” Keith jolts forward, making a grab for Dustin’s collar, but in a moment of surprising grace, Dustin ducks to the side and heads to the door, trying to ignore the goose bumps that erupted on his arm when Keith said his fucking missing poster.

The sun is still fairly high in the sky when Dustin walks outside and grabs his lone bike from the rack. He pushes off, but not before flipping off Keith as he turns The Palace sign to closed.

The roads are as empty as the arcade, only a stray car passing him by as he pedals home. It’s a longer ride than he’d ever tell Keith it was, not that the teenager would care. But Mike and Lucas and Will care; both yesterday and today they tried to convince him to ride home with them. Stay in the pack. But that score still eludes him and as long as the sun shines above the trees, what’s there to hurt him?

“Famous last words,” he mutters to himself, stealing the line Lucas would say if he was riding beside him. It gives him a sliver of satisfaction when he reaches his house without a single jump scare. The satisfaction is quickly replaced with guilt. He knows there plenty to fear out there as he watches as the sun slips below the tree line.

As he kicks his bike stand up, reasoning that his mom won't care if he leaves the bike on the side of the yard, Dustin hears the faintest laughter coming from down the road. He turns, expecting to see the Murray kids playing in their driveway, Mrs. Murray keeping a close eye.

No Murray children. Instead, he sees a red balloon, bouncing at the very end of cul-de-sac. Bouncing closer as the laughter starts ringing louder and higher.

His front door is only a few feet away, but he can't take his eyes off the balloon as it grows closer to his driveway, the cacophony of children's laughter ever growing. Dustin holds his breath when the balloon comes parallel to his neighbor's driveway, the noise it carries with it roaring in his ears.

But balloon bounces right past his driveway, taking its time going the length of the road until it reaches the stop sign at the intersection and abruptly vanishes.

Dustin blinks once, twice, but the blood red balloon is gone. He takes a few tentative steps toward his front door, daring to steal a glance in his house's direction.

The laughter returns. Only now it isn't a chorus of high pitched squeals. It's low, rumbling, a chuckle that echoes across the empty street. Dustin dares himself to look, like Mike would, and he doesn't see a balloon. He sees a clown.

It's a clown with bright orange hair, white face paint, a nose and a smile drawn on with dark red paint. It smiles two smiles, one slick red and one all teeth. And it smiles right at Dustin.

It starts skipping down the street, exaggerated leaps and heel clicks that sound like gunfire. A dancing clown.

Dustin doesn't give it a second thought as he races the rest of the short distance to his front door, grabbing and fumbling with the latch. The laughter sounds closer now, as close as his front yard. Dustin propels his entire body weight against the door and finds himself face down against the hall carpet. He manages to kick the

door closed behind him, but not before hearing:

"Even baby Holly wasn't that scared." And the laughter still rings in his ears.

...

july 10th

"Sorry but can someone explain again why we're here?"

Lucas stands at the edge of the drainpipe, feet carefully positioned away from the murky water inside. Dustin is a little further in, but not enough that he can't be back in the sunlight at a second's notice. Only Will and Mike choose to venture deeper into the pipe, flashlights cutting twin beams of light into the darkness.

"This is the last place anyone saw Tommy," Mike answers without looking back.

"So we're hoping to find him so he can kick our asses?"

"What was he doing near here anyway?" Will asks, his voice so quiet only Mike catches the question.

"Nancy told me he and Carol would-..."

"Ew! Seriously?" Lucas's voice bounces off the walls of the tunnel, as does Dustin's gag.

"I was gonna say smoke near here," Mike finishes lamely, looking too distracted to laugh like Will tries to.

Mike ventures a few steps deeper into the tunnel, the gray water soaking his shins. Will swallows and tries not to look down as he follows Mike's path. Mike's flashlight pointing at the water makes it that much harder to forget where they are.

"Still wondering why we're here!" Lucas calls after a few minutes of

silence.

Mike stops, his flashlight stilling on a spot in the water. Will can make out a scrap of folded newspaper, muddled and illegible but a newspaper.

“I think it’s all...” Mike stops, the words not coming together the way he wants them to, the way that makes him look sane. In recesses of his mind, he hears glass shattering and a door creaking open. “All the disappearances...what they all have in common is the sewers. Jennifer Hayes’s purse was found by that open manhole near the diner, Tommy H was here, and Holly...”

Will places a hand on Mike’s shoulder and musters a sad smile when Mike glances back at him.

“Wait, how do you know all this stuff?” Lucas asks.

Mike’s glance at Will turns sheepish. Will clears his throat. “I uh...I took some pages from Chief Hopper’s files.”

Dustin’s mouth hangs open and on another day, in another location, in a better world, Mike may have laughed at how comically far his jaw dropped. When Mike looks to Lucas, any thoughts of jokes fade.

“You made Will steal from the police department? Are you insane? You know how much shit you’ve probably gotten us into?”

“Literally,” Dustin mutters, but he isn’t smiling.

“Look...” Mike takes a step back towards the pipe’s opening and tries not to grimace when he sees Lucas taking a step back too “Something is really wrong here.”

“Yeah, no shit Mike! Jennifer is probably dead and so is Tommy and so is...” Lucas stops himself before he leaps off the dangerous edge, the edge they have so precariously teetered on for a month now.

Will tries to reach for Mike’s shoulder again, but Mike shrugs him off. “It’s more than that. And I think we all know it.” Mike looks to Dustin, who refuses to meet his eyes. “I saw something. Something...”

Mike doesn't have the chance to continue.

Outside, in the river beyond, a figure charges into view, nearly collapsing into the water before regaining footing and running out of view again.

"Is that...?" Dustin races out to join Lucas at the lip of the pipe, Mike and Will not far behind.

"Eleven Brenner."

"And Troy and James."

The boys all turn to the left in time to see their middle school bullies rushing around the bend in the river, splashing through the water and narrowly avoiding the rocks in their path. In the distance, Eleven is not so lucky. Her foot catches, sending her tumbling in. Troy and James have twin looks on their faces the four know too well. Young sharks out for blood.

It's Lucas who picks up the first rock and chucks it straight at them. The rock clips James in the shoulder, causing him to halt and look frantically around him. He doesn't spot them in time to avoid Lucas's second rock hitting him in the stomach. James instantly doubles over. There's a faint laugh to their right. Dustin is thankful to see it's from Eleven, now standing in the middle of the river, her knees bloodied but her smile without pain.

"What do your little fucks think you're-..." Troy gets cut off by Will's rock to the side of the forehead. He starts fumbling in the water, desperately searching for his own rock and giving Mike plenty of time to lob a rock that lands on his back.

"Come on, let's go!" Lucas calls, barreling into the water towards Eleven. She's still smiling when he grabs her hand and pulls her toward the shore.

Troy and James are screaming after them, but every time Mike looks back, they remain far in the distance. Lucas leads them in a straight path to their bikes hidden by the side of road, concealed by the trees.

"Did you see the look on James's face when you hit him with that

first one?” Dustin yells, the adrenaline reanimating him to the Dustin of a month ago, the one always yelling just a little too close to Lucas’s ear.

Dustin chatters on, allowing even a few interjections from Mike, as he recounts the fight they all just experienced. So it’s Will who notices Eleven off to the side, staring at the group with a stranger mix of awe and confusion on her face.

“Are you okay?” Will asks. The conversation behind him abruptly stops.

“I-...” Eleven squirms under the scrutiny, her eyes darting between them all before settling on Will. “I’m just wondering why you did that for me.”

Dustin hardly has to think before answering, “We losers have to stick together, don’t we?”

And Eleven doesn’t hesitate either. “We do.”

...

july 24th

There’s something about Mike Wheeler, Eleven decides as she walks back from the quarry, the bottom of her jeans slick with mud.

Not something sad, even if a cloud does hang over him in the rare times someone forgets to fill the silence. Not something angry, even if Eleven always spots the flashes of rage when they pass a row of missing posters, the new addition of James an eerie image that’s taken up a place of residence in all their minds.

Not sadness, not anger, not even happiness; even when they’re laughing, and they’re all laughing so much more, it carries the bitter aftertaste of denial.

It’s something determined. El counts herself lucky to catch the rare

sign of the plan formulating in the edges of his mind. It's all in his eyes – fiery and even a shade hopeful when she sees him shoving stolen papers and city maps in his bag. The hardest part is waiting for him to tell them all.

Her entire summer so far feels like a waiting game and she caught her first glimpse of what this town could be leading her towards when she met the boys. And she'll ignore how it all seems dark and foreboding. She wants to laugh a little more. And when Mike hides his papers and maps away, she hopes it's because he wants to laugh more too.

...

july 26th

There's mud on the hem of her dress that will not scrub off. She tried after the boys split off from her to make their own way home. As she walks up spotless stone steps of her house, El tells herself it's no use crying over a little dirt.

The house greets El with its usual cold silence. No wooden floorboards make creaking impossible, but every footstep across the floor still echoes in the cavernous space. She learned to soften the noise a long time ago, walking on her toes up the main staircase. All she wants is to disappear into her room, but the noise would only grow if she dares to take the stairs two at a time.

"How was your day, Eleven?"

She's three steps away from the top landing, but she has to turn around. He's at the bottom of the stairs, still in his work suit. "It was good, Papa."

"Good. And what made it so?" He places a hand on the bannister, but his feet remain planted on the hall floor.

"I...I spent the day with my friends." She remembers the mud on her dress. "At the park."

“Were you with that young lady? Maddie...”

“Max.” El nods. Behind her, a little ways down the hall, El swears she hears a door opening. Impossible. She keeps her eyes on her papa, his blank face, and waits.

After a long moment, he removes his hand from bannister and takes a stride toward his office. “Dinner at seven-thirty, Eleven.” He does not look at her again. He steps into the office, draws the double doors closed behind him, and El remembers to breath again.

She climbs the last three stairs and starts the long walk down the hallway to her bedroom.

“*Jane.*”

El freezes. A door on the opposite side of the hall swings a little farther open.

“*Jane.*” It’s a woman’s voice. One she’s heard before, one she seared in her memory because she’ll never get to hear it again. Thought she’d never get to hear again. But there it is, quiet and insistent and repeating *Jane, Jane, Jane*. Coming from the opposite side of hall.

El turns; how can she not? At the end of the hall, the bathroom door stands halfway open, the warm orange light from the setting sun streaming into the house. *Jane, Jane, Jane*. It starts sounding like a lullaby. El takes a cautious step forward and keeps going until she’s in front of the door, her trembling hand resting on the frame.

“Mama?”

There is a figure in the corner where the light can’t reach. It’s tall and it’s humming the tune of hush little baby. El steps into the room and the door slams shut behind her.

“*And if that mockingbird won’t sing, mama will have your neck to ring.*”

It steps out of the darkness and its empty eyes look down at her even as its blood red smile is all wicked happiness. It’s always empty eyes. El opens her mouth to scream anyway.

"Oh, I wouldn't do that." It giggles. *"It's a lot less scary in here."*

El closes her mouth. A little voice, so faint and soft and truly *her*, says it is. It is so much less scary in here. But It doesn't really want you to think that.

El looks the creature in the eyes. "No. It's not scary at all."

Her hand finds the doorknob just as the clown's face starts to contort and those eyes don't look so empty anymore. She sees something, only a glimmer, but it's there.

She's out the door and racing down the hall to her bedroom, collapsing against the other side of the locked door, before she can put the emotion to a name.

There's a knock. "Dinner."

Her heart rate does not slow. "Coming, Papa."

It was fear.

...

august

"Hey Mike?"

"Yeah?"

They're in the Byers's living room, Mike holding a book given to him by Nancy on the history of Hawkins and Will gripping his red color pencil in one hand and his once absent-minded drawing in the other.

"You've seen it too, haven't you?"

His head snaps up, but the startled look on his face quickly disappears and Will sees he's still scared. Scared of not being believed. Mike shuts his book slowly and places it to his side like it will burst into dust if not handled with care. "Seen...seen what?"

Will holds out the drawing, his hand trembling.

The silence in the room as Mike studies the picture has Will expecting to hear the low chuckle, the eerily calm voice in the dark, always just a few inches behind him. Will swears he sees Mike's hands shaking just like his.

"Yeah...I've seen It too."

...

august 3rd

"So I guess the meeting of this club of losers can now commence."

Dustin offers a half-hearted clap that Mike takes with gratitude.

"Why the urgent meeting?" Lucas asks. He looks a little skeptical, a little suspicious, a little ready to fly at a moment's notice. Mike wonders, and not for the first time, if Lucas has ever seen It. If he has so far been spared.

"There's something...wrong here." The boys all crane their necks to look at El, huddled in the very corner of Castle Byers, an old flannel blanket thrown over her knees even though the temperature has climbed into the high eighties.

When El doesn't say any more, Lucas turns back to Mike. "Yeah, I'd say so."

"No-..." Mike pauses, looking to El, offering her a chance to continue. She only looks at the ground. "She means there's something wrong with Hawkins. Something..."

"It's like it's poisoned." Dustin has a pudding cup in his hand (chocolate, his favorite) but he's only swirling the plastic spoon around. The rest of his stash lies in his backpack in the center of the fort, offered but untouched. No one has the appetite.

Lucas looks from Dustin back to Mike, skepticism giving way to agitation. “Is this about the missing kids? Please tell me you’re not still having Will steal stuff from the Chief.”

“The Chief isn’t going to be able to do anything about this,” Will says softly, like the Chief would barge into the fort at any moment to hear his doubts. No, not doubts. With the facts coming out and into the open, they all need to realize there would be no Chief Hopper or Hawkins’ neighborhood watch or mothers coming to save the day.

“It’s up to us.” Mike looks at all his friends – Eleven with her eyes on the dirt, Dustin and his swirling spoon, Will hugging his knees, and Lucas trying to understand – and he pleads. “We’re the only ones who know. We’re the only ones who can stop It.”

Silence falls over Castle Byers when Mike sticks his hand into the middle of the circle, willing them all to join, to make the pact. Will hesitantly reaches out his hand and rests it on top of Mike’s. El follows, a little surer. Dustin stares at the three hands and with a small sigh, puts his hand over El’s.

Mike doesn’t want to look at Lucas with any expectations or pressure. He wants Lucas to take the leap of faith, follow each other headfirst into any give adventure because it’s what they’ve done since before they knew what pacts or promises meant. But when he does finally look to Lucas, he sees him shaking his head.

“Stop what, Mike?” Lucas asks. “Stop a serial killer? Five kids doing what the Chief and the rest of the police haven’t been able to do?”

“If we stay together...” El starts, moving her free hand to rest on Lucas’s wrist. “Like we did in the river, against Troy and...”

Lucas snatches his hand away. “Troy and James were...*are* just bullies our age. You’re talking about a lunatic kidnapper...”

“It’s not a person!” Will insists, voice loud enough to make everyone drop their hands in shock. “It’s...It’s a thing and it can become anything it wants to and...it’s feeding off Hawkins kids. Show him the book, Mike.”

Mike reaches into his backpack and pulls out *Hawkins: A History*. He opens the book to the last page he marked before sliding it into Lucas's recoiled hands. "It starts back in the 1800s. There's a period every 27 years where kids go missing, sometimes adults, and then there's some kind of big incident. In 1956, Hawkins Laboratory partially exploded. No one really talks about it because the government rebuilt it really quickly, but...it happened. And so did huge fires and freak accidents like trees crushing whole buildings."

"Accidents, all..." Lucas is shaking his head frantically, paging through the book aimlessly like he'll suddenly land on the perfect page that will tell them it's all coincidences and unhappy mistakes. Pages without pictures where a sinister figure lurks in the background, often holding out a balloon.

"It's real," Mike says, placing his hand in the center of the book. "I wish it wasn't, but it is. And we're the only ones who know and that means we're the only ones who can do something."

"Together." El catches Mike's eye and musters a small smile.

Lucas lets the book drop to the ground. "No." He struggles to stand in the fort, fighting his way past Mike and Will to reach the tarp exit. "Everything you're saying...it's not possible. And I can't spend my summer chasing around phantoms or worse...finding things I don't want to see." He looks directly at Mike. When you know someone for so long, have the friendship Mike and Lucas have, silent conversations become like a second language. Mike turns away so he doesn't have to hear it.

"Don't get yourselves ki-..." But even now, Lucas knows better. "Don't go missing too."

...

august 6th

The last time Lucas went three days without speaking to Mike Wheeler dated all the way back to third grade and the great slingshot

debacle. It was years before Will, years before Dustin, just Lucas Sinclair and Mike Wheeler against the wide, wide world of Hawkins Elementary School. And they almost ruined it over the ownership of a decrepit slingshot unearthed in the woods beyond the playground.

This fight – and this plan – is bigger than a playground rivalry and Mike has to know that. But Lucas still can't stop looking at the phone, willing it to ring with Mike on the other end of the line saying he was being stupid idiot and just like that things would go back to normal again. They could enjoy their summer, as kids their age were supposed to do.

The phone doesn't ring and at three his mom grows tired of his sulking and banishes him outside, to Dustin's or the Wheeler's to do anything that is not looking dejected in her presence. He spends another half hour idling on the front steps, picking at leaves on the bushes that lined the house. His mother banishes from that spot too and sends him off on his bike with instructions to go to all the places his friends don't want him to be.

He goes in mindless circles around the neighborhoods until he realizes he has started pedaling to Will's house out of sheer habit. He brakes at the edge of Mirkwood even though he's tempted to finish his journey. Will can see reason, Will knows when to be cautious, Will can...

Someone is whistling behind him. It's not a tune Lucas has ever heard before, but the whistling itself, the airiness and the struggle to hold out a note for longer than a half second at a time, that Lucas has heard before.

"Will?"

Lucas cranes his neck to look, ready to see Will riding down the road and maybe laughing to himself because the other boys really never could teach him how to whistle. But no one is there. And yet the whistling continues.

He turns his bike around and starts backtracking. Will must have taken a woodland route and that's why he's out of Lucas's view. Only, Will never liked riding his bike on the rocky Mirkwood trails. So he

stashed his bike close to his house and decided to walk to Mike's or Dustin's or The Palace through the woods. Only, why walk at all? The rational explanation keeps slipping out of Lucas's reach.

He pedals a little further back down the road and the whistling only gets closer, still airy and still wavering with every held note. Lucas skids to a stop when the whistling feels right next to his ear, perhaps a little ways to the left.

To the left. Mirkwood House.

Hardly a house, the decrepit building sits at the very edge of Mirkwood, an abandon property left to rot and ruin long enough ago for rumors to swirl around about it. It's haunted, it's possessed, it's home to an infamous old Hawkins serial killer. The last rumor grows in popularity with every new missing poster.

Lucas knows it was actually built to house some unsightly sewage facilities, but he also knows Will holds his breath when he passes it for more reason than the rank stench of Hawkins's waste. That's why the persistent whistling coming from inside makes no logical sense. Will would never set foot on the overgrown lawn, let alone walk through the front door. Unless...

"Mike!" Lucas drops his bike to the side, but keeps his feet planted on the concrete. "I swear to god, you guys...going into the pipe was one thing, but this is just really stupid! Mike!"

The door to the house swings open, but none of his friends stand on the other side. There's nothing there at all. Except someone is still whistling, stronger than before. And Lucas recognizes the tune this time. Ten Little Soldiers.

Though he has to know better, he starts filling in the rhyme. Only one refrain comes to mind. *Three little soldier boys walking in the zoo; a big bear hugged one and then there were two.*

The whistling stops. But Mirkwood House begins to rumble. When Lucas hears the first heavy footstep against the floor, he rushes to pick up his bike. As if visualizing his moves even from the darkness of the house, the footsteps become quicker. One Lucas's feet slips off

the pedal. It's in this tiniest fraction of time that Lucas sees what awaited him in the house.

A mammoth size black bear bursts through the doorway, splinters of wood flying into the yard. Mouth salivating, teeth bared, the bear sets its red eyes on Lucas.

At the same time the bear charges for the street, Lucas slams his feet on the pedals and sends his bike flying back towards civilization. He can't look back; if he looks back, he is lost.

"It's not real. It's not real. It's not." Black bears only reach an average weight of two hundred and forty pounds. Black bears do not have red eyes. Black bears cannot whistle. And Lucas does not know how he manages it, but he laughs. Lucas Sinclair laughs as he pedals for his life away from the world's largest, red-eyed, whistling black bear.

He no longer hears thundering footsteps gaining on his bike. A smart person would continue pedaling until they collapse safely in the arms of their mother. But Lucas doesn't always have to be the smartest person. He stops in the middle of the road, familiar houses surrounding him on both sides, and summons the courage to turn.

The laugh of relief, of triumph, he had planned dies in his throat. There's no black bear anymore. In its place stands a clown. The clown. It's not laughing either.

"Holly Wheeler was laughing too. They almost always laugh right up until the end." It smiles with the same jagged teeth as the bear. *"All your friends will see soon."*

Before Lucas can yell back a reply, It vanishes. A breeze that had not been in the air before blows through the trees, whistling as it went. Sounding out a mantra *soon soon soon*.

...

august 7th

“Mirkwood House.”

Mike jolts awake when the crackling voice fills the room. He fumbles in the dark, looking for a light and looking for a weapon. The flashlight on his bedside table fulfills both. He darts the light around the room, but when the static and words come again, *Mirkwood House*, Mike realizes the source. He rushes to his desk, fearing the voice on the other end of the line will disappear if he doesn't reach the radio in time.

“I'm here. Lucas?”

Lucas's voice crackles again over the walkie-talkie. “I think our best shot at beating It is at Mirkwood House.”

And Mike knows. It's come for all of them now. “I'm sorry. I'm sorry you had to...”

“Let's just kill this thing.”

They're both smiling. Really, truly smiling.

...

august 8th

They let Mirkwood House bate them, trick them, separate them, and lead them through a maze of their own design, a catacomb of all their fears preserved in a sickly old house Hawkins never had the true desire to wash its hands of.

When Mike and Lucas finally make it back through the maze and burst back into the front room, It has Will by the throat, nails scratching down the wooden boards behind his head. Black nails, one grazing at the side of Will's neck, the tiniest bead of blood trickling down to his shoulder blade. Will is struggling but one arm is trapped against the wall and he hugs the other close to his stomach. Mike can see the bone jutting out at all the wrong angles.

“Get off of him!” Lucas yells and pulls back his slingshot, a silver bullet – the silver bullet Will stole for them – ready to fire.

It rotates its head slowly around and grins at them, like welcoming old friends home again. Back to the party. *“Good. I was worried you’d miss all the fun back there.”*

Will still struggles vainly against the hand at his throat and Mike chooses to look at him instead, willing his friend to look in his direction. He looks up enough for Mike to meet his eye. “Will. Remember what Lucas told us. What El told us. It’s only powerful when we think it’s real.

The grin fades and now Mike can look It in the eye. “It’s not real.”

The hand around Will’s neck loosens and Will stops struggling, his lip curling in determination as he stares down the clown as boldly as Mike. Lucas keeps the slingshot drawn, waiting for the opportunity to launch the bullet in the space between those beady red eyes.

“Not real?” The clown completely releases Will and rises to Its full height. Lucas adjusts his aim. *“Not real.”*

Mike nods.

It takes a shambling step forward. The grin returns. *“I’m not real enough for Holly Wheeler’s big brave brother.”* The clown takes a sweeping bow then, arms brushing across the floor, nails scratching across the floor. Folded in on itself, the clown’s head snaps up.

“It was really enough for her.”

Everything that happens after appears disjointed, unconnected images and figures colliding in his mind. As he starts to lunge, he feels an arm lash across his chest, the unexpected force throwing him backwards. He hears someone cry out El’s name. A flash of silver whizzes through the air. A screech. Another cry, this time his own name.

Mike looks up when a shadow falls over him; looming above him, the clown with a metal skewer lodged in Its brain. *“Kill you all. Kill. You. All.”*

His hands fall to the floor, searching for a rock, a glass shard, anything. But the clown does not reach for him. It races into the back room and Mike does not have to follow to know. He and Lucas had seen the well. The connection to the sewers he had discovered a month ago.

But that's all it's ever been. Connections and theories and plans that amount to his friends bleeding and broken on a grimy floor. El collapses down beside him and wraps her arms around his shoulders, holding on tightly. He wants to tell her he doesn't deserve her comfort or her faith. Across the room, Will is crying and he hears Dustin's voice ringing out "I think we have to put back in place."

"Don't you dare touch me!"

When they finally amble out of Mirkwood house, the sun had disappeared below the trees. There must be police out looking for them. They go to their bikes together, start riding off together, but split without a single word. Lucas goes with Will to the Byers and Mike silently thanks him for his bravery. Dustin pedals away soon after. Only Mike and El remain, El gripping the back of his jacket tighter than usual as he steers them towards her house.

When they arrive, El steps ten feet away from him and keeps stealing looks back at her door. But there's that faith still written across her face. "We can still do this."

"How?"

"It was scared. And I think Lucas hurt It when the bullet hit It's shoulder and..." El's hands fidget at her side, like she wants to reach out to him and can't let herself. "We can get better and we can try again."

Kill you all. Kill. You. All.

He sees her with blood dripping from her nose. He sees her ten feet too far away for him to save.

"But what if I can't be better?"

There's a coppery taste in his mouth; the inside of his cheek is

bleeding. The front light of El's house flickers on and in the way her eyes grow wide, Mike knows he has to go. She still looks ready to call out, saying something reassuring that Mike will wish to be true, but Mike pretends not to notice. He pedals off, not too far from home, and enters the wash of flashing blue, red, and white lights on Maple Street, the cars parked in front of his house again.

All his fault. And he thinks he should be mature enough to know that all his guilt and all his placing blame help no one in the end. But he also thinks of how good it could be if all his guilt and all this blame could grow strong enough to stop the very beating of his heart.

...

august 16th

Nancy never comes into his room, so when she suddenly materializes in his doorway and comes to sit at the end of his bed, Mike immediately feels uneasy. He's tempted to hide the Hawkins history book under his covers, but it seems useless when she was the one who lent it to him.

She does notice the book though and the frown she was wearing when she walked in deepens.

"How did Will really break his arm, Mike?"

"Did Mrs. Byers call mom? Is she not going to let him see me anymore?" Mike feels tears welling up in his eyes and there's an aching feeling in his chest, not unlike the feeling he had when he first saw the police lights outside his house that day.

"No one's talked to mom. And I'm not going to either." Nancy's reassurance cannot make the aching go away.

"I want to tell you," Mike says, doing his best to swallow back his tears.

"You can."

“So many people are getting hurt or going missing or...” Mike thinks about Lucas and Dustin and Eleven, still perfectly whole in body, but so unlikely to ever forget what they’ve seen and heard. How does he make Nancy understand it never had to be this way? “I know it can’t be all my fault, but some of it is. Will’s arm, that’s on me. Lucas having to...know things and see things. Holly’s disappearance...”

“Hey-...”

“And if I tell you now, I’d just be dragging another person into it. That’s...that’s the only thing I can control. Not telling anyone else.” There’s a sob lodged in Mike’s throat and if Nancy doesn’t stop looking at him with naked pity in her eyes, he will not be able to will it away.

Nancy slides her hand into his and squeezes once. “People make their own decisions, Mike. If they choose to follow you...they know you can’t protect them all the time. Even though I know you want to think you can.”

He’s crying now and he thinks Nancy is crying, too. After a few minutes, she asks him again to tell her what happened. And he does tell her, the whole story from the very beginning.

...

august 20th

“So I guess the second meeting of the losers club may now commence.”

“Dude, your sister is not a loser. Jonathan, maybe...”

Will lobs his candy wrapper at Dustin from across the bus aisle, but Jonathan just chuckles. “Gee thanks, kid.”

Dustin holds out a pudding cup, a peace offering, but Jonathan waves it off in favor of focusing on Mike and the complicated map he rolls across the bus floor. All seven end up in various positions of kneeling,

hunched over the plans as Mike guided them along the sewer system of the city. His finger lands at Mirkwood House. "All roads...or I guess pipes lead back to here."

"And you're sure we can beat this thing?" Nancy asks as she reaches out her hand to place lightly over Mike's own.

And Mike looks at what everyone in town would call a motley group. A gang of misfits and their leader's cool older sister. He sees her with a baseball bat and Jonathan with his camera. He sees Lucas with his slingshot, Will and his flashlight, Dustin hurling insults and El hurling rocks. He sees himself holding a little paper boat that refused to float away and be forgotten.

"Yeah, we can beat this thing. Together."

Everyone in the broken down, left for dead school bus smiles, a happy silence falling over them that Dustin feels free to ruin. "So Hawkins is probably doomed."

...

august 24th

They're in the maze again, deep in the sewers, Hawkins's mythological labyrinth where every corner holds a new horror brought to life by the dark thoughts in the back of all their minds. Demogorgons and gargantuan bears and deformed bullies and fathers and the clown.

And her.

She's the one who lures him to the center of the labyrinth. A flash of her pink raincoat and her yellow rubber boots and he's gone, racing down the tunnels after her to find she'll always be just a few inches out of his reach. His own *SS Wheeler*.

But she's waiting for him now, in a room of gray water puddles and stolen keepsakes in a pile that reached the ceiling and floating bodies

that he cannot look at or he'd really be gone. He focuses on her, shining his flashlight on her face and begging for there to be light reflecting back at him in those eyes.

"I'm sorry, Mike. I lost your boat."

There are footsteps rushing into the room, two more girls' voices calling his name. He hears the gasps, but he cannot tear his eyes away from his sister. Not again. So he takes a step forward. "It's okay. It was our boat. The SS Wheeler."

Holly steps forward, too. "Will you help me find it, Mike? Please?"

"No."

The ground starts trembling beneath him. "No?" And the little girl in front of him still looks like Holly; she has the same blonde pigtails peeking out under her pink hood and the same yellow boots. But it's not her voice anymore.

Someone comes up beside him, shoulder brushing his. Nancy. She presses something cold and metal into his hand and though he does not look at her, he can sense her nodding, telling him it's okay, believing in what he has to do.

Mike steps forward, long strides until he's right in front of her; he could reach out and take his baby sister's hand if he wanted to. He knows now it would be lifeless and cold. "You're not Holly."

But he has to close his eyes when he pulls the trigger.

It does not die then. It's too powerful for a single shot to strip away a thousand years of evil. It takes a metal baseball bat to the clown's face. A slingshot to the bear's neck. Small hands strangling the demogorgon's neck. Rocks taking out the blank faced father's eyes. It takes all of them, a united front of scared kids who could not be scared when they're together.

When It's finally gone, collapsing down a dark abyss with a final screech, no one cheers or claps or even smiles. The triumph registers in a silent collective sigh of relief. And Mike drops to his knees and cries the final tears he has to give. El rests her head on his shoulder

and Nancy on the other, Will's cheek pressed against his back, Jonathan's hand twining in Nancy's hair, Lucas wrapping his arms around El and Will and Dustin, all of them huddled together. They're clinging to life – a good life, a happy life – that seems on the horizon again.

...

september

"Hey, Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"Will called. They want you to meet them at The Palace. I can drive if we leave now." Nancy disappears back up the stairs.

Their *Dungeon & Dragons* characters are lined up in a neat little row on the table in front of him – the wizard, the dwarf, the knight, and the newly introduced elven maiden. Across the room, taped to the wall, there's a sketch of the same lineup of characters with a tacked on section that includes a paladin and a proud princess. All are looking off into the distance, determined soldiers prepared for a final battle. Will burned the drawing of their monster the night it died, but Mike likes to imagine that's what their alter egos are facing. Together, always.

Mike takes a moment to stay looking at the picture on the wall, the old mainstays and the new additions. He moves across the room with another scrap of paper in his hand, a commission Will finished for him yesterday. He places it beside the proud princess, the place where she'd most want to be. A littler princess and beside her, a dungeon master.

"Mike! Let's go!"

"Coming!" Mike quickly wipes a tear from his cheek before rushing up the basement stairs.

And twenty-seven years from now, he won't remember what his

father had playing on the TV, what color the stripes on his shirt were, or what his mom was cooking in the kitchen. But he'll remember the way Nancy ruffled his hair as he raced her out the door. He'll remember how the sun was shining high overhead, one of the last late summer afternoons, and that his friends were waiting for him.

He'll remember what it felt like to know he beat the devil.

Author's Note:

1. Best thing I google searched for this fic: what do black bears weigh?

2. There are so many things I want to talk about and explain and geek over, but I want to let the fic speak for itself. If you finish this (and god bless you for making it to the end) and do want some things explained or just want to geek with me, feel free to drop a line to my tumblr blog (nancywheeler.tumblr.com)

3. But something I do want to talk a little bit about: Lucas does have the 1990s Stan / 2017 Richie role in this fic. I think Stan and Lucas both have very rational and honest approaches to most situations. They inhabit the view most of us would take when we come to face to face with shape-shifting clowns (because we have to be honest with ourselves, most of us would not run fists first into danger like Bill or Mike Wheeler). So I know “the skeptic” isn’t always the most favorable role in stories like these, but I do see it as in character for Lucas and to be honest, he’s pretty much the real hero in this fic (just like Stan “this bird doesn’t exist” Uris is in the novel).

4. I really hope you enjoyed this! It was a marathon to write so I’m just glad it made it out into the world.